The Administrative Communication Log

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Quality patient care is dependent on clear and effective communication. Communicating policies and procedures across a total institution to all healthcare providers is a major challenge. The larger an institution is, the more likely it is that changes in policies and procedures are not effectively communicated to the very personnel responsible for implementation. In turn, issues and problems originating at the bedside or clinic are frequently lost in the communication maze. These issues are never clearly communicated to the administrators responsible for managing the problems they represent.

The communication patterns inherent in hierarchical organization structures inhibit, rather than support, patient-centered care. The tools of automation can break down these barriers and open communication. This poster will demonstrate a simple yet effective approach to enhancing and tracking formal communications in a complex matrix healthcare organization.

Top-down communication frequently starts in routine meetings where administrators meet with frontline managers. These frontline managers are expected to share information with all of their staff. They are also expected to bring back any comments, issues or problems to complete the communication circle with bottom-up feedback.

The automated method demonstrated in this poster was developed to help all members of the organization assume responsibility for the communication process. This is a simple, yet effective approach for tracking both top-down and bottom-up communication. It has been successfully used by nurse administrators for the past three years in an academic medical setting. This straightforward tool deals with the cumbersome task of communicating information through the entire organization. The outcome is better communication resulting in improved patient care.

In this approach, critical communication units discussed in management meetings, are identified and assigned a code. The code provides information on when and where the critical communication originated. Linked with each code is a brief description of the communication unit. Data are tracked in a Lotus spreadsheet. For example, a new policy related to patient visitation is first announced at a weekly management meeting. This communication unit is given a code number on the agenda and in the meeting minutes. When frontline managers share this information with their staff, the same code number is recorded in the minutes of the meeting. When these minutes are returned to the administrator, the feedback is recorded on the Lotus spreadsheet. This documents the complete transmission of the information.

When this system was initially implementeed, not everyone followed through. As time passed, however, middle managers began to see that the system was a helpful tool for all levels of staff. Gradually, participation in the use of the log grew throughout the department. In management meetings, any member of the group might suggest "numbering" an item for the agenda, so it will be tracked on the log. Group members even began to compete to see who could come up with the appropriate code number first, when an agenda item was being added.

This poster will address the human interface that supported the automated approach. Once implemented, the advantages of the system created momentum for maintaining the data. Currently, managers and staff throughout the organization depend on automated support to communication.

The poster will include four parts. Part one explains how to set up software to track this type of communication. Part two focuses on orientation and engaging personnel in the development of an automated support to communication. Part three gives examples of problems that were effectively managed with this approach. Part four includes sample tools and management reports generated with this approach.